

Scriptures

Romans 7:15-25a

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. 17 But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

¹⁶ “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ¹⁷ ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’

¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; ¹⁹ the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

²⁵ Jesus said, “I thank^[i] you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.^[j] ²⁷ All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

²⁸ “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Sermon: Who will save us?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and redeemer.

Last week I preached that we all serve something. We serve or Lord, or we serve certain things in the world. Most often we try to do both, and end up having a rather hard go of it. This weeks topic continues on the idea of that struggle between who we want to serve, and who we still continue to serve through habit.

Paul writes ‘For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.’ Isn’t that the truth. As much as we want to embrace our new selves and serve the God who gives us life, we live much of our lives under the influence of our old habits.

We all know that we are a new creation – the old has gone, the new has come. I don’t know about you, but I find that this new creation still has a lot of the old creation left in it. I am far from a perfect being, I am not sin-free, I often don’t feel holy, or sanctified – I find that I’m frequently not even a good example to others.

I used to joke about it, saying that my life should serve as a warning to others – but this is really not a laughing matter. This is serious, and I find that my behaviour raises some critical questions. If I still sin, then what does that mean about the promises of God? Am I in fact a new creation, or am I still the old one? Can I face God with any kind of clear conscience? How do I know that my life is hidden in Christ when I continue to stumble on a regular basis?

In some ways, these words of Paul comfort me. St. Paul is a Christian superman of sorts – much of the New Testament was written by him, he was a dedicated church planter and gospel spreader. He was the first to give Jesus’ message of

hope to non-Jews, and we could reasonably argue that Paul was the single greatest achiever in Christian history – certainly Christianity in his time and ours would be much different had Paul not encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus.

So the fact the Paul also struggles with falling into his old ways, the fact that he also feels like a slave to his sin makes me feel a little better. I don't have to feel like I'm a second rate Christian because I struggle – I'm a normal Christian because I struggle.

As most of you know, I didn't grow up in church. As a teen, and into my twenties I did a lot of things that I'm not proud of – I wasn't violent, but I was not a good person. I cheated, I lied, I stole things. I jumped from place to place, girl to girl and basically only really worried about myself. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die accurately described my outlook on life.

Then, when I was 33, I encountered Christ. I became a believer and my life was changed forever. I really did experience a new creation – I was a new man. Where before I was intolerant and contemptuous of people who didn't see the world the way I did, I became more patient and understanding.

Where I used to hold grudges, now I forgive. People who I used to find irritating, boring or otherwise disagreeable, I learned how to love and accept, despite their habits or mannerisms that used to drive me crazy. It really seemed as though overnight I had moved from being self-serving and conceited towards being a loving, caring and serving person. I was ecstatic – the promises of God were true and I was truly living a resurrected life.

Because I didn't grow up Christian, it was easy for me to clearly see the changes in myself, and so did others. There was a distinct before and after picture, it was easy to compare the old man and the new man.

But as time went on, and the initial feelings of joy and bliss faded somewhat, I started to notice that while I had improved dramatically in some areas, there were still remnants of old Mikal lurking below the surface. More than remnants really – old Mikal was somewhat buried, but still very much alive.

There are two areas of my life that for years screamed out old Mikal – lack of self-discipline, and smoking. Perhaps they're different sides of the same coin. Now I wouldn't say that smoking is a grievous sin in the same way that say, killing someone, would be. In fact, I'm not sure that it's even a sin at all to smoke occasionally – after all, Jesus compared himself to John, saying that John the Baptizer was sober and stern, and was rejected by the people, while Jesus came eating and drinking and was also rejected by those same people. But the point is that while both may have been rejected by the people, both the abstainer and the partaker were both sent from God – God seems to be ok with his son beginning his ministry by making wine for people to enjoy – so, enjoying what this creation has to offer is not necessarily a sin.

What turns a harmless pleasure into sin is the hold that it has on us. That was my problem with smoking – it wasn't that a cigarette now and then was a terrible thing – it was the hold that it had on me. It was the fact that when it was cold and raining outside, and I was inside, warm and playing with my family, then I would find myself shivering in the garage.

Back to Paul: I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. If I do what I don't want to do, then it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. I see in myself another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

For years, this slavery to tobacco was constant reminder that I have a long way to go – it was a part of old Mikal that won't seem to die.

Thankfully, that beast has now been slain – I no longer smoke. However, I still see old Mikal coming around again.

For years, smoking was the most visible and easily identified area of my life where my new man and my old man were at war. Thankfully, that beast has now been slain, but there are plenty of other instances in my life in which I still see the old Mikal rearing his ugly head. You all will have similar struggles where you feel powerless because you keep failing. It could be that you struggle with gossiping, gambling, harsh words to your spouse or children, too much time wasted in front of the tv or computer, too much money wasted on things you don't need, a lack of prayer, lack of reading the bible, lack of compassion for your fellow human beings. The list is endless – we seem to have a huge capacity for coming up with different ways to sin.

Whatever our sin is, one thing we have in common is that we don't do what we want to do, and we do do what we don't want to do. We are slaves to sin – we do it no matter what.

So what is our response to this? There are two basic ways of dealing with this feeling of impotence in the face of what seems to be overwhelming power – we either continue through sheer force of will to conform to what we think we should be, or we give up – since we can't win the battle we just abandon the war entirely.

If we think we can overcome sin through force of will – just deciding not to do it anymore – then we set ourselves up for failure and frustration down the road. While we may be able to resist sin much of the time, those times that we don't, when we give in to weakness, those moments are the ones we remember.

I didn't remember the thousands of times that I resisted the urge for a cigarette – I only remembered those times that I failed and succumbed. The accuser made sure of that. Those moments of weakness fill us with guilt – we beat ourselves up over our failures, and then become much less able to resist in the future. Willpower alone is not enough to break the power that sin holds over us.

The other response, giving up on even trying since we are bound to fail anyway – often this response comes after a period of resisting through willpower alone – giving up is even worse. While we may not feel the guilt anymore since we're no longer keeping score, we will slide into even worse behaviours that we wouldn't have done before. We're no longer fighting the good fight – we're no longer on God's side, we become free agents, only pleasing ourselves.

Associated with giving up is the development of a victim mentality. It's no use trying because of my father, my boss, I'm poor, I'm hungry, I'm weak. We no longer take responsibility for our actions, after all 'As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly', and 'the sow is washed only to wallow in the mud.' Giving up is becoming a defeated victim of the world, we are casualties of the war between good and evil.

So it would seem that there is little hope – everything under the sun is pointless, we just can't seem to get away from sin, no matter what we do. Either we fight it and live miserable, stunted lives of self-loathing, or we give in and live as slaves to our desires.

'I delight in the law of God in my inmost self,' Paul writes, 'but I see in myself another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells within me.' Paul can see the better way, but he's unable to attain it, and so he cries out 'O wretched man that I am!'

We've all been in this place. Hopelessness, frustration, despair even. It's called rock bottom, and it's the point at which we finally face reality. When we can no longer pretend that we are in control, but admit that we really can't do it. This is the place called repentance. We come face to face with the reality of ourselves, unadorned with our usual justifications and excuses – just our naked selves – and we realize at our deepest level that something needs to change.

Paul reaches this point of realization and asks 'Who will rescue me from this body of death?' This is why Paul is a super-Christian. It's not that he has the ability to control his sinful self – he can't do that any more than the rest of us. It's because he found the right question to ask.

'Who will rescue us from this body that leads us to death?' It is Jesus Christ!

Jesus saves us from our flesh that keeps on sinning. He doesn't save us by making it impossible for us to sin. Sometimes I think it would be easiest if God somehow reprogrammed me so that I couldn't sin, but that would just make us all into some kind of robots, unable to think or act on our own. If we are programmed robots, then love cannot happen. Love is a self-conscious choice, an act of giving ourselves to another. It is because of love that God gives of himself to us, gives us his life, his spirit, his son. God is love, love requires free will, and we are made in the image of God, so God can't simply reprogram us to not sin without destroying us.

God has a better solution in mind. Jesus Christ bears the burden of our sin. As he made his way up the hill to Golgotha, the place he would be crucified, he was not only weighed down by the weight of the cross on his back. He carried our sin up that hill. Sin was crucified with Jesus; the power of sin was broken on the body of Jesus.

So while we continue to sin, the loving, self-giving, sacrificial act of Jesus covers our sin. We are washed in the blood of Jesus. When God looks at his faithful people, he sees his son. He does not see our sin. That means that we are not longer bound by sin. The accuser has no power any longer to throw our guilt in our faces to control us. The power of sin is broken.

This doesn't mean that we become complacent, and give up fighting sin because Jesus has wiped our slates clean. It means that instead of focusing on our sin, instead of obsessing about these behaviours of ours that we want to change, we instead turn our focus to Jesus. We work on our relationship with him.

The way we build our relationship and deal with our sin is simple – repentance. We bring our sins, our defiled lives before our Lord, and we tell him everything. We tell him that even when we know the right path to take, we often turn the other way. We tell him that at times we enjoy the sin that holds us captive, even though we know as we say it that this breaks his heart. We tell him that we are dying, that we are wretched, and like Paul we wonder who will rescue us from this body of death. We bring it all to him, then we listen while he speaks.

And this is what he says 'This is my body, this is my blood, all given in love for you. Take it, and eat it, and know that your sins, though they be like scarlet, are as white as snow. You are forgiven; and everything is new.' Jesus speaks words of life into our sinful lives destined for death.

Repentance is not just lip service – we don't merely recite a litany of sins as though we're dropping off our dry cleaning to be done. Repentance is a recognition of the reality that our actions are leading us to death, and that we cannot continue on our present path. We confess our sins to Jesus not merely for disposal, but so that we can be healed and turn away from those things that both grieve God and lead us to death.

Do you remember Jesus washing the disciples feet? He said to Peter, who after his initial hesitation got excited and wanted a full bath, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' We have all been bathed in the blood of Jesus, repentance is our footwashing, cleaning away the dirt and sin we pick up along the road as we walk through life.

We will always be sinners – try as we might, we will not be perfect - but the new life given to us through Jesus and the Holy Spirit is a life of constant renewal, we continually begin again through the daily footwashing of repentance, and forgiveness. The power of sin over us is broken because we are no longer defined by our sin, by the acts of the old Adam, but our identity is in the new Adam, the spirit that cries Abba, Father. We have been cleansed, and we really are a new creation – every minute of every day.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!
Amen.